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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000233

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/I, PRM/ANE

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: TWO NGOS WITHDRAW FROM SYRIA, CLAIM "NO REFUGEE  
CRISIS"

REF: DAMASCUS 94

Classified By: Charge d'Affairs Michael Corbin, per 1.5 (b) and (d)

1. (SBU) Summary: Save the Children UK (part of Save the Children worldwide Alliance) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) announced on April 2 that they would not be continuing negotiations with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) over an MOU to begin Iraqi refugee assistance programs and would be abandoning operations effective immediately. By contrast, International Medical Corps (IMC), Danish Refugee Council and Premiere Urgence have signed MOUs with SARC and have begun operations. End Summary.

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Two European NGOs Call It Quits  
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2. (C) According to British and Norwegian diplomats, the three principal reasons NRC and Save the Children UK gave for abandoning operations in Syria include:

- First, Save the Children UK's legal advisors had grave concerns over the "double signatory" clause of the MOU that states the NGO must operate under a double-signatory bank account, with the SARC as the other signatory. They believed this raised issues of accountability and ownership, and meant in effect that the NGO would not be in full control of the funds, despite being accountable for the finances in reporting to donors. The Norwegian Refugee Council expressed similar concerns. (Note: IMC representatives told us that while there were initial concerns about the double signatory clause, they were now comfortable with this arrangement because the SARC cannot withdraw funds from the joint account on its own. IMC is able draw funds from this account, with SARC approval. This account holds only a month's worth of program funds at any given time. End Note.)

- Second, the size of their planned programs had decreased dramatically. Save the Children UK, since 2002, had an ongoing contract with the Ministry of Education running an "inclusive education" pilot project in 26 schools across 7 governorates in Syria. This program aimed to increase pupil participation in the education system by establishing School

Management Boards comprised of teachers, pupils, parents and community members. Save the Children UK's original target was to reach 40,000 Iraqi children in school and 32,000 out of school, but they were only allowed to access 1,150 Iraqi children in school and were given no access to Iraqi children outside of the education system.

- Third, Save the Children UK's country director reported to British diplomats he did not believe the projects would have much of an impact, saying "there is no Iraqi refugee crisis."

The NRC reportedly echoed similar views, stating there was a lack of humanitarian needs in the education sector. She expressed serious doubts about the needs of Iraqi refugees in general. (Note: For the past several weeks many NGOs and diplomatic missions have been questioning the official figure of Iraqi refugees in Syria, 1.4 million as reported by UNHCR, (reftel). Privately, NRC has been among the most critical of UNHCR figures and took particular issue with the 20 million USD funding given by UNHCR to the Syrian Ministry of Education last year. End Note.)

13. (C) Both NRC and Save the Children UK informed President of the SARC Dr. Attar, on the same day, about their intentions to withdraw. Attar asked Save the Children UK if their decision to pull out was a political one. According to British diplomats, Dr. Attar appeared to have had "his nose put out of joint" by the decisions to pull out. British diplomats reported that Dr. Attar sent a letter to Save the Children UK and tried to entice them to stay with the offer of "a lot of money to be had." According to NRC representatives, Attar was "furious" and said that NRC's withdrawal was a political decision against Syria because NRC is linked to the Norwegian government. Attar allegedly threatened to "denounce" NRC in the press.

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Other NGOs Make Headway  
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14. (SBU) Since news of the Iraqi refugee crisis broke in 2006, 24 international NGOs have submitted their credentials to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to commence operations in Syria. Of these, 14 have been approved to enter into negotiations with SARC, sign an MOU, and begin work. IMC, the Danish Refugee Council and Premiere Urgence are the three NGOs that have thus far signed an MOU with the SARC. A day after NRC and Save the Children UK made their intentions known to SARC IMC, the Danish Refugee Council and Premiere Urgence received a final authorization from SARC to begin operations. Both had been waiting for over two months for final authorization since initially signing their MOUs. EU and Norwegian contacts speculated that the pull-out of the NRC and Save the Children UK may have spurred Attar to act so as to avoid the "additional embarrassment" of more NGO departures.

15. (C) Comment: NGO frustration over the slow pace of SARG approval of MOUs allowing them to operate is nothing new. The long line of organizations still waiting for SARG approval is a nagging reminder of the bureaucratic obstacles that continue to slow Syria's response on this issue. At the same time, the approval of three new MOUs with the SARC is encouraging and would have been unthinkable a year ago. While it is regrettable that Save the Children UK pulled out, their move provided impetus for the SARC to be more responsive. As for the assertion that "there is no refugee crisis," UNHCR and other IOs continue to believe the situation is getting worse, not better. According to UNHCR, the number of Iraqi refugees remains uncertain, but the extent of the growing needs of the known Iraqi refugees does not.

CORBIN